

Message Text

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ACTION EUR-25

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 EURE-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-07 H-03

INR-10 L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-07 PA-04 RSC-01 PRS-01 SP-03

SS-20 USIA-15 ACDA-19 IO-14 DRC-01 OMB-01 /135 W

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P R 251729Z APR 74

FM AMEMBASSY LONDON

TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 9814

INFO AMEMBASSY DUBLIN

AMCONSUL BELFAST

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 LONDON 05128

E.O. 11652: XGDS-1

TAGS: PINT, PFOR, UK

SUBJECT: FUROR OVER DEFENSE SECRETARY STATEMENT ON
BRITISH TROOPS IN NORTHERN IRELAND

1. IN AN APRIL 24 SPEECH TO MINEWORKERS UNION MEMBERS AT NEWCASTLE UNDER LYME, MINISTER OF DEFENSE ROY MASON STATED THAT PRESSURE WAS MOUNTING IN BRITAIN TO PULL OUT ITS TROOPS FROM NORTHERN IRELAND. MASON'S REMARKS WERE MADE DURING A SPEECH ON THE LABOR GOVERNMENT'S DEFENSE POLICY REVIEW. HE SAID "I BELIEVE THE PEOPLE OF NORTHERN IRELAND SHOULD BE DOING MUCH MORE TO HELP THEMSELVES. THEY TOO MUST BE SICK OF THE INTERNAL STRIFE WITHIN THEIR OWN FRONTIERS AND THE PERSISTENT GRIEF THEY ARE HAVING TO BEAR." AFTER PRAISING THE RESTRAINT OF BRITISH TROOPS IN ULSTER AND HIS CONCERN FOR THEIR WELFARE AND MORALE, HE APPEALED FOR MEN TO JOIN THE RUC AND THE UDR. IT WAS IN THIS CONTEXT THAT HE MADE HIS REMARKS ABOUT MOUNTING PRESSURE IN BRITAIN TO PULL OUT ITS TROOPS. IN RESPONSE TO QUESTIONING AT THE END OF HIS SPEECH, MASON RETREATED SOMEWHAT AND DENIED THAT THE GOVERNMENT HAD A TIME LIMIT FOR THE PRESENCE OF BRITISH TROOPS IN IRELAND IN MIND.

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2. REPORTS OF WHAT HE SAID HAVE CAUSED A FUROR. WHEN

THEY REACHED WHITEHALL, THE MINISTRY OF DEFENSE HASTILY PUT OUT A STATEMENT SAYING "THE SECRETARY OF STATE WAS NOT SUGGESTING THAT HMG HAVE SET A TIME LIMIT FOR WITHDRAWAL OF TROOPS IN NORTHERN IRELAND. HE WAS REFERRING TO PRESSURES WHICH ARE KNOWN TO EXIST IN THIS COUNTRY TO BRING TROOPS HOME. THE DEFENSE SECRETARY WISHES TO MAKE IT CLEAR THAT THE FORCES IN NORTHERN IRELAND WILL STAY IN NORTHERN IRELAND FOR AS LONG AS IT IS NECESSARY TO MEET VIOLENCE AND THEY CAN BE RAPIDLY REINFORCED IF NECESSARY. IT IS NOT AND WILL NOT BE HMG'S POLICY TO SET A DATE FOR THE WITHDRAWAL OF TROOPS. THERE IS NO CHANCE WHATSOEVER THAT ANYONE WOULD BOMB THE ARMY OUT OF NORTHERN IRELAND ON THEIR WAY TO THE CONFERENCE TABLE. THE GOVERNMENT'S POLICY IS UNCHANGED."

3. PRESS AND MEDIA REACTION TO MASON'S STATEMENT WAS IMMEDIATE AND SHARP AND THE DEFENSE MINISTRY HAS BEEN BUSY TRYING TO REASSURE QUESTIONERS THAT NO POLICY CHANGE WAS INTENDED. EDITORIAL REACTION IN THE QUALITY PRESS ON APRIL 25 HAS BEEN CRITICAL OF MASON'S REMARKS WHICH ARE REGARDED AS A BLUNDER. EDITORIALS EXPRESS CONCERN THAT THEY MIGHT PARTIALLY UNDO THE EFFORTS OF THE PRIME MINISTER LAST WEEK TO CONVINCE BOTH SIDES IN ULSTER THAT BRITISH POLICY IN NORTHERN IRELAND HAS NOT CHANGED AND THAT THE BRITISH WOULD CONTINUE TO MEET THEIR RESPONSIBILITIES.

4. THE "TIMES" EDITORIAL NOTES THAT MASON IS ONLY THE LATEST IN "A LINE OF MINISTERIAL WOUNDED FOR WHOM THE 'OR ELSE' DEVICE FOR KNOCKING SENSE INTO ULSTER HAS GONE OFF IN THEIR OWN FACES. LIKE SOME OF THE OTHERS,

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AMCONSUL BELFAST

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 02 OF 02 LONDON 05128

HE HAS HAD TO BE BANDAGED BY A DEPARTMENTAL STATEMENT EXPLAINING THAT HE DID NOT MEAN WHAT HE WAS BEING TAKEN TO MEAN." IT NOTES THAT MASON'S REMARKS WERE POLITICALLY UNFORTUNATE AND WILL ADD TO FAULKNER'S ALREADY FORMIDABLE DIFFICULTIES WHILE GENERALLY ENCOURAGING THE INTRANSIGENT ELEMENTS IN NI.

5. RESPONSIBLE OFFICIALS AT BOTH THE NI OFFICE AND FCO HAVE TOLD US THAT MASON'S SPEECH HAD NOT BEEN CLEARED BY OTHER INVOLVED MINISTRIES AND HAD NOT RECEIVED CABINET APPROVAL. IT CAME AS A COMPLETE SURPRISE TO THOSE WORKING ON NI MATTERS AND, UNDERSTANDABLY, IT IS REGARDED BY THEM AS MOST UNFORTUNATE.

6. COMMENT. INITIAL REACTION TO MASON'S REMARKS HAS MADE IT CLEAR THAT IT WILL HAVE AN UNHELPFUL EFFECT ON THE GOVERNMENT'S EFFORTS TO MOVE AHEAD WITH ITS NI POLICY, THOUGH WE ASSUME EFFORTS WILL BE MADE TO LIMIT THIS BY FURTHER STATEMENTS THAT HMG'S POLICY HASN'T CHANGED. IT SEEMS ALMOST CERTAIN THAT MASON WILL COME UNDER FIRE WHEN COMMONS RECONVENES AFTER THE EASTER RECESS NEXT MONDAY.
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